

THE STUDY OF MAN

TWO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS VIEW "NO WAY OUT"

The Unconscious Vs. the "Message" in an Anti-Bias Film

MARTHA WOLFENSTEIN AND NATHAN LEITES

NO WAY OUT, the latest film on race prejudice, revolves around the difficulties of a young Negro interne in a county hospital of a large Northern city. On his first assignment to the prison ward, he is called upon to treat a hoodlum who has been wounded in the leg during a robbery. Led by various signs to suspect a brain tumor, the doctor performs a spinal puncture. The patient dies immediately, while his brother, also wounded and handcuffed to the adjoining bed, screams: That nigger killed my brother! The doctor wishes to have an autopsy to prove that his diagnosis and treatment were correct. But permission must be obtained from the surviving brother, the Negro-hater, who has gruesome fantasies about what they would do to his brother's

body, and refuses. He gets word to his friends that his brother has been "murdered" by a Negro, and they plan to avenge the "murder" by a race riot. The Negro community is forewarned and by a well-organized strategy surprises and beats its white enemies, but without the participation of the Negro doctor, who disapproves of resorting to violence. The doctor forces the issue of the autopsy by "confessing" to the "murder" of his patient. The autopsy exonerates him. The hoodlum, to whom the physician who has performed the autopsy gives an explanation of his brother's death, remains unconvinced: That's medical double-talk—I tell you I saw him kill my brother. The hoodlum escapes, lays a trap for the Negro doctor, and is about to murder him when he is stopped at the last moment.

No Way Out is perhaps the most ambitious of the growing list of films designed to combat anti-Negro prejudice. All, like those about anti-Semitism, have aroused debate as to their effectiveness by critics, social psychologists, movie-makers, and experts in intergroup relations. Here NATHAN LEITES and MARTHA WOLFENSTEIN, the authors of *Movies: A Psychological Study*, published this year by the Free Press (Glencoe, Illinois), give their views of *No Way Out*, and in the process demonstrate some of the pitfalls and complexities that face the producers of films intended to reshape racist attitudes. Mr. Leites, who holds his Ph.D. degree from the University of Fribourg, has done important research in the field of propaganda. He now teaches at Yale. Miss Wolfenstein holds her Ph.D. degree from Radcliffe College and she is now assistant professor at the Child Development Center at Yale University.

The makers of the film have tried in various ways to present Negroes favorably (though without exaggerated nobility) and their detractors unfavorably. The Negro hero belongs to one of the most respected professions and is shown to be competent in its practice; throughout the film he demonstrates a high standard of character: he is intelligent, unassuming, industrious, a good doctor, a good son, a good husband. The Negro-baiter, on the other hand, is presented as a psychopathic criminal of the lowest status (the part is played by Richard Widmark, one of Hollywood's most "detestable" villains). And, to reinforce the figure of the hero, there is a white doctor, an embodiment of respectability, calm courage, reason, and responsibility, who helps the Negro in his fight for vindication. On the *conscious* level—the level of argument—it is likely that any but violent Negro-haters will be moved by this film in the